On November 11, 1918 the Treaty of Versailles ended the bloodiest conflict in human history. Known as "The Great War", World War I had claimed the lives of over nine million combatants. An entire generation of young men had been lost, their blood staining a European landscape left in tatters, and an exhausted group of barely triumphant nations sufficiently traumatized to attempt something new — an organization with a mission of permanent peace.

While central European empires fell like so many worn but resistant dominoes, to the north and east another came into existence. Barely a year earlier, the Russian October Revolution had set into motion the eventual emergence of the grandly named Soviet Union, not officially designated until 1922.

Members of the Russian republic that would dominate the Soviet Union — in land, population, and wealth — the people of northeast Siberia carried on with a life style dictated by weather and opportunity that few in a capital city thousands of miles away could even imagine. To them, a change in who ruled would mean new officials to pay, perhaps more than in the past, but as part of a system of tribute that was well-known to these tribal communities. Government presence was a fact of life, one that typically meant extraction more than safety.

The land north of the Arctic circle had been home to humans for thousands of years, but barely 70 miles from the icy coast, a large island, named for a man who never saw it and not acknowledged as an island until a beleaguered crew on an ice-bound ship would float by, had never supported a permanent population. Without human enterprise, Wrangel Island held little interest for the Tsarist or the Soviet governments. At least not until some other nation claimed the ice-strewn rock.

Laying claim to lands far from one's national home was as old and controversial as human endeavor, but it was given a slightly more precise meaning when European (and later American) ships began to populate the seas in ever-increasing numbers. The exploitation of distant lands by nations that expanded their reach with ship-tipped tentacles was only temporarily slowed by the objection of people already in possession. Unstoppable, colonization marched on.

But what about unoccupied lands? The Antarctic, the Arctic, Wrangel Island? As it turns out, the method wasn't so very different, at least in the beginning. You landed, planted a flag, perhaps read a document, and "claimed" the land for the government or agency paying the bill. And, somehow, all other nations were expected to honor this act. Sometimes you didn't even land; you claimed based on distance, or perhaps a single sighting from the mast of a ship.

This was before the value of sometimes remote places was fully known, and today the subject of who can claim what remains an ongoing controversy, one that can result in violence, or at the very least, a lot of chest-beating and behind-the-scenes negotiations. The conflict over land did not end with the shrinking of the world; the expansion of knowledge about its resources only increased the controversy.

In the past, however, during the era of ship exploration, planting the flag was considered a valid occupying tactic, and Wrangel Island was no exception. At more than 70 degrees North Latitude, it was an ice-bound isolated speck of land, but interestingly the closest nation — Russia — was not the first nation to set humans on the island. Not surprisingly, that honor is also controversial, and most likely belonged to undocumented hunters of the past (who, wisely, did not stay), but it was an American ship whose commander rowed ashore and became the official "first man" of a place he did not even know was an island. That knowledge would come in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, less than a generation before the soldiers of the war were born.

In 1918, when the weary citizens of the world could once become interested in the unstained Arctic. The fascination had never been really been absent — the North Pole and South

Pole had been reached not long before the conflict began — and a at least one explorer was happy to stoke the public interest with stories of hardship and bravery.

Born in Canada in 1879 to Icelandic immigrants, William Stephenson emerged from college in North Dakota with a name much more exotic than the North American version. A teaching opportunity at a prestigious college in Massachusetts was too small for Viljhamar Steffanson, for he believed he was meant for history and that the place to fulfill his destiny was the Arctic. In that sense, his confidence was correct; in time his Arctic credentials would include the brilliant and the controversial.

When Vilhjamar hatched the idea of claiming Wrangel Island for the British Empire, it was not his first association with the island. In 1913 one of three ships under his command as part of the Canadian Arctic Expedition became stuck in the ice off the northern coast. Leaving the ship to go hunting, when Vilhjamar returned the beleaguered Karluk was gone. Rather like a migrant bird with a skewed compass, the ship was drifting west with the pack ice, rather than east as was originally the plan. When the Karluk was crushed, most of her crew would make their way to Wrangel, where a saga of triumph and tragedy would begin.

Unlike the Canadian expedition, the colonization idea would not be publicly promoted. Secrecy was the word; after all, if you were going to claim a land nestled against a different continent, discretion was wise. Advertising for young men keen to participate in an unprecedented adventure, in 1921, Steffanson's four colonists, accompanied by an Inuit woman who would sew and cook for them, departed from Nome on an American ship. With them were enough supplies for six months, dogs, a cat, and two flags, one for the New World, the other the symbol of an aging empire.

This is the story of the young Inuit woman hired to assist the colonists.

On September 15, 1921, four white men, including one Canadian and three Americans, and one Inuit woman were set ashore on the southeast shore of Wrangel Island. With them were several dogs, and enough supplies to provide a minimal sustenance for two years. Unlike the *Karluk*'s crew's desperate sojourn seven years before, this was an intentional landing, part of a colonization scheme by the Canadian explorer, Vilhjalmur Stefansson. The mission of these five young people was to claim Wrangel Island for the British Empire. They went ashore with the expectation that when the ship that brought them, the *Silver Wave*, steamed away, another ship would relieve them the following year.

Nearly two years later, on August 19, 1923, the American steamer *Donaldson,* under the command of Harold Noice*,* approached the camp. On board this ship were 13 new colonists, 12 of them Inuit. As the *Donaldson* came to a stop, the beach appeared deserted, but the following morning when crew members walked the shoreline a solitary figure came forward to greet them. A young woman, she indicated that she was the only living person on the island. Yet even as she seemed grateful to see them, she looked searchingly along the beach beyond the crew. She believed that a rescue ship would either carry the three men who had left six months before or that they would have news of them. At the camp, the fourth person was dead, at rest in the shelter the five had shared. As she would soon learn, she was the only survivor of Stefansson's expedition. Her name was Ada Blackjack. Her only companion, other than the island's wildlife that had sustained her, was the expedition's cat, Vic.

At 23 years of age, Ada was not the youngest member of the expedition; all five were less than thirty. Born in 1898 in Spruce Creek, Alaska, thirty miles west of Nome, Ada Delutuk lost her father when she was eight years old. In 1918 the small town was nearly wiped out by the flu

epidemic, but by then Ada resided in Nome where she lived with Methodist missionaries. There she had learned to read, write, and speak English, to be a good American citizen and Christian, to read her Bible, avoid vices — to become fully integrated into another culture. But she was also taught skills considered more traditionally northern, particularly for an Inuit girl. Most importantly, Ada learned to sew. What she did not learn were the ways of the Inuit society she was born into. Ada knew nothing of hunting, and memories of life away from Spruce Creek, no matter how squalid Nome was, had undoubtedly dimmed by this time. In addition, Ada was mortally afraid of polar bears. While her location and education separated her physically and emotionally from her birth home, Ada was nevertheless born into a culture quite different from that of the missionaries. She carried with her the legends of her ancestors, much of it taught by an influential grandmother, and never forgotten by the young child. A culture that relied on hunting was deeply animistic, with a psychological and emotional link to nature that the white ways did not embrace. Respect, awe, and fear, too, characterized the stories of Ada's youth. Most feared of all was the great bear — the Polar Bear. Ada came to fear this animal more than death itself.

Living in Nome, her sewing skills would serve Ada well in her young adulthood, as increasingly, she learned to be alone. At the age of sixteen she married Jack Blackjack, and moved away from Nome. Bearing him three children, two of whom died, she found herself in a marriage where beatings and enforced starvation were a way of life. Fortunately for Ada, Jack Blackjack left her, and under Inuit cultural practices, Ada could declare herself unmarried. Penniless, with her surviving five-year-old son, Bennett, Ada walked back to Nome.

Bennett had tuberculosis and thus was a weakened, if nevertheless happy, youngster. Ada placed him in an orphanage where he could receive care and went about the work of trying to make a living. This she did by cleaning homes and sewing, but the income was inconsistent, and a dream of having Bennett with her in a permanent home seemed completely unattainable.

A town with origins in the gold rush of 1898, thrown together for the needs of miners, Nome was both dirty and violent, a fearful place to live. Yet it was as much home to Ada as the land where she was born. Her skills were suited to the white man's culture, and she admired many aspects of her adopted home.

During her time in Nome, Ada became acquainted with Nome's chief of police, E.R. Jordan. When Jordan learned that the four young men of the Stefansson expedition — Milton Galle, Lorne Knight, Allan Crawford, and Fred Maurer — had arrived in Nome and let it be known that they wished to hire Inuit families as hunters and seamstresses, he realized that this was an excellent opportunity for Ada. Employing skilled Inuit was a common practice; northern expeditions relied on the abilities and knowledge of the native peoples. Jordan recommended Ada as a seamstress and encouraged her to take advantage of the steady paycheck the expedition could offer. Although extremely reluctant to leave Bennett, Ada could appreciate the opportunity the money would bring. She applied for the proposed year-long journey. Her well-kept appearance, her knowledge of English, and her ability as a seamstress were deciding factors in her selection. Her pay was designated as $50 a month, enough, if carefully saved, to bring Bennett home.

When Ada accepted the position, it was with the understanding that there would be other Inuit in the expedition. But when the others failed to show, she alone accompanied the four men and their supplies on the *Silver Wave*.

Only a few people knew that Ada and her companions were going to Wrangel Island. Since his goal for the explorers was to plant the British flag on the island, Stefansson had sought to keep the destination a secret. Although the information did slip out as they prepared to leave, it was not until their sailing that the knowledge became public. Departing Nome on September 9,

late in the season for a northern expedition, and without the Inuit families hired to assist the explorers, the *Silver Wave* steamed west. The last visit to Wrangel Island had taken place seven years before, but in that case, the sinking of the *Karluk* and the enforced sojourn on the island was an unintended outcome of an expedition with a goal of sailing the Northwest Passage.

It was not without misgivings and warnings, and certainly, as the first group that would intentionally stay on the island, the mission was unprecedented. Explorers had undertaken difficult journeys in the past, but Stefansson's idea of this project as the beginning of colonization was unusual. It is clear, too, that he intended that the men would hunt, and the amount of supplies they carried was calculated based upon success in acquiring game. Stefansson acknowledged that hunting was the only way that any permanent home could be sustained on a place as remote as Wrangel Island. Far north of the Arctic Circle, encased in ice, sometimes year-round, cold and forbidding, except for the tiny plants that grew, flowered, and set seed in the short summer, the island was a land defined by wintery conditions. Offshore and on land, mammals and birds adapted to the extreme environment fed and raised their young. Thus, although hunting opportunities should abound for settlers, Wrangel was nevertheless far enough to be isolated for extended periods of time. It was perhaps no accident that the island was not, at least historically, inhabited by humans prior to Stefansson's proposed settlement.

With her five young people aboard, four of them keen for a great adventure, the fifth there by necessity, the *Silver Wave* first traveled to East Cape, Siberia. Here they were informed that Wrangel belonged to Russia, not Britain. Yet the local commander laughed when told that the island was the intended destination, and considered the chances of making it there very remote. A second attempt to buy a umiak, a sturdy boat, resulted in failure; as in Alaska, this skin craft considered so crucial to hunting sea mammals was deemed too expensive. Here, too, Ada expected more Inuit to board the steamer, but this did not happen, adding to her anxieties. Taking on more supplies, the ship departed on a calm day, only to become embroiled in storm-tossed seas, losing the small skin boat they had purchased instead of a umiak, and becoming lost. Temporarily becalmed, the sea was not finished with the *Silver Wave*, and soon another storm sent the seasick explorers below. Free of the tempest at last, on September 14, the *Silver Wave* approached Wrangel Island, coming to rest in a small bay. Put ashore the following day, the five colonists noted fox and bear tracks on the beach, found an abundance of driftwood, and, feeling better now that they were on solid ground, began their plans for their camp. They unloaded their supplies and, spending their last night on the ship, wrote their final letters home.

Ada watched with dismay as the *Silver Wave* left. Not only was she the only woman and Inuit in the group, but the impact of the isolation was undoubtedly more severe for her than for her companions. The four men had come to seek adventure and possible glory as Arctic explorers. Two of them had been on Stefansson's expeditions in the past; one had already survived a sojourn on Wrangel. Only Ada was there for a situation that she had had come to view as unchangeable. She needed money, money to bring her child back to her. Now she missed him without relief. She felt a loneliness never before experienced, and although she had been born and raised in the Arctic, Ada was ill-equipped to deal with the environment of Wrangel. Neither a hunter nor fisherman, she did not know how to use a rifle. Adding to the increasing conflict within, she was terrified of the bears. She could not relate to the raising of the British flag, a ceremony undertaken while the now suspicious American captain of the *Silver Wave* watched offshore. The four men placed their names on a document, in hoped-for perpetuity. On the beach, Ada cried as the ship sailed out of sight. They were alone, and she did not know when she would see her son again, if ever.

Not surprisingly, Ada had difficulties adjusting to her situation. The first polar bear was shot a week after they arrived, and to her horror, the bears were common that late summer. Yet

summer soon faded, the temperature sank well below freezing, and soon snow began to fall. About this time, Ada begin to cry for hours at a time, so homesick she could hardly function. Her work became inconsistent, varying between diligent application and sullen, motionless quiet. It did not help when Ada became infatuated with one of the explorers, Allan Crawford, the attractive twenty-year-old Canadian. Unsolicited by Allan, this attraction was difficult for everyone, including Ada. In response to the emotional stress, she moved into her own hut and worked little. In her isolation, she began to believe that all but Crawford wanted to kill her. As if to enforce that feeling, Ada was punished for her failure to work, left outside at times, or denied meals.

As the autumn waned, the men built a winter hut and began to take hunting more seriously. Unable to reach the seals that lounged on the ice flows, and unsuccessful in trapping the numerous Arctic fox, they concentrated on the polar bears, even though the numbers were diminishing. Still homesick, and sick with fear, too, Ada continued with her inconsistent behavior. In November she ran away, only to be retrieved screaming her fears. A second camp was established at this time, 15 miles north, and when Ada persisted in traveling between the two in order to visit Crawford, the men decided to take extreme measures, tying her to a flagpole, which only resulted in more wandering when she was released. More punishment followed, including denying her food. The men had apparently decided that the only way to handle the woman who had become a burden rather than an asset (without Ada's help, they had been forced to process the bear skins and do the sewing) was through punishment. They also decided that Ada would be sent home when the relief ship came the following summer.

Ada was clearly in turmoil, and neither she nor her fellow colonists knew how to help her condition. She felt unwanted, unrequited in her love of Crawford, and homesick for her son. Ada was probably suffering from a condition known as Arctic Hysteria, with the source of the affliction obvious. It was now dark all of the time, she was alone, deathly afraid of the bears, and unbearably isolated. The island was colder than Nome, and Ada only wanted to return to the topsy-turvy world of the city.

And then, without any apparent reason, she was better. It happened in the middle of December. Knight told her once again she must work if she was to stay in the warmer, winter house, and soon she was working hard, cooking, sewing, and cleaning. She became part of the team, seemingly in an instant. At this time, too, she became friends with Galle, who was the most kind to her.

Yet she was still known as "Oofy" or "Nympth" and a reading of Knight's diary reveals that he referred to her as "the woman". Not "Ada". She was teased in a way that confirmed the sense of superiority the men held over her. Only a year later would Ada become the recipient of gratitude when she would receive the gift of a bible from a man whom she most feared.

The winter of 1921-1922 was a quiet time for the five occupants of the hut on the beach. The northern camp had been closed, the hunting was slow, and the weather was often stormy and always bitterly cold. The sun's appearance in January did little to ameliorate the situation, and the temperature stayed consistently below zero. Game was still scarce in April, but finally the elevated sun warmed the air, and the five began to anticipate the arrival of the relief ship in summer. They moved to a new camp in May. But with the game failing to show for reasons they could not understand, and the seals remaining unreachable far from shore, all began to talk longingly of home as their diet, except for when they were lucky enough to procure game, was reduced to bread and rice. They shared homesickness as well as the food that remained. None of them competent hunters, a reality that Stefansson had apparently not known of or simply ignored, with their poor shooting the fat geese that flew overhead were frustratingly unobtainable. Without a boat, they had little luck in killing the offshore seals.

Although the sun rose higher in the sky, the weather stayed cold, and by June the sea was still iced over. While this was discouraging the five still hoped for the ship. They grew thinner, more haggard. Ada attempted fishing without success, and the hunting remained slow. Although they still had supplies, unrelenting hunger was becoming a new reality. Loren Knight appeared the most weakened, and all were subject to various aches and injuries.

Hopefully, they scanned the icy horizon for the sails of a ship. They did not know — could not — that back home the planning of a relief mission was going very slowly.

Since the original funding of the expedition had been hard to arrange a year before, it is difficult to know what made Stefansson believe that sources for a relief mission would be easier. He had incorporated the venture and pooled his funds in order to provide money for supplies, but the money had run short, and by the middle of June the plans for relief that year were in jeopardy. Contacted regularly by the men's families, Stefansson still proclaimed that all was fine, and that the explorers could easily survive another year. But he felt the pressure (and perhaps some personal doubt) and was able to squeeze some money from the Canadian government and the rest from supporters and friends, just enough for a relief ship. He acquired the services of Joe Bernard, captain of the schooner *Teddy Bear*. The season was late when the *Teddy Bear* departed, at the close of a summer considered by navigators as one of the iciest in twenty-five years. In retrospect, the chances were small from the start.

Yet Bernard made a prolonged effort to reach the island. On August 20, 1922, the ship departed from Nome with a fresh group of colonists on board, supplies, and a year's worth of mail for the group on Wrangel. Bernard had an extra incentive — bonus pay if he reached the island. Making his way to East Cape in Siberia, and being warned again of the extent of the ice (which within a few days Bernard could verify for himself), heading west the *Teddy Bear* skirted the icepack while the captain and crew continued to hope for favorable southern winds that would open a lead to the north. Whenever the wind shifted in that direction, however, the *Teddy Bear* would be pushed against the coast, hemmed in by ice. Bernard and his crew reached Cape Vankarem, a projection on the extreme northeast coast of Russia, only to learn that the ice was worse to the west and several ships were frozen in. Avoiding the same fate, Bernard turned around and headed east, still hoping for leads, still attempting to work his way to the northwest. The ship was damaged and at least marginally repairable, but the continued attempt to enter the ice was a losing battle. By the second week of September, even Cape Serdze, only a little closer to Wrangel, was difficult to reach: the propeller was barely functional, and the entire crew was ready to abandon the attempt. On September 22nd, the *Teddy Bear* was back in Nome, Bernard's attempt to reach Wrangel thwarted by autumnal ice. His efforts subject to criticism, a reading of his report reveals a methodical, practical and brave man who reported conditions and his ability to deal with them from an experienced view. He had relied on the opinions of other captains as well, a prudent approach in the Arctic.

As Bernard steamed home, on Wrangel the five colonists had abandoned any hope of a relief ship that year. The temperature was dropping, the ice thickening. No ship of that era was a match for the onset of the early winter.

Yet while Ada and her companions prepared for what could only be a desperate winter that year, in the comfort of his home in the United States, Stefansson proclaimed that there was no need for worry. The island was just an "ordinary place", where living was no more difficult than being in a city at much lower latitudes (he compared the sojourn to that of Robinson Crusoe). Yet the hard reality that few seemed ready to face was that he had sent people with little aptitude for hunting, and, perhaps more important, with expectations of a relief ship that year. This hope had influenced their hunting tactics, or lack thereof. Weakened, with supplies running

low, another year was beginning to seem like too long to wait. Unknown to Ada, plans were being made for an attempt to reach Siberia.

Although by autumn the hunting on land was diminished, the men did kill and recover part of a walrus, preserving some meat and oil. But the person who demanded his meat be cooked until very well done was beginning to show signs of illness. This was Loren Knight, the man Ada had feared so much the first few months and the one with whom she had the least camaraderie a year later.

In early July, Knight, whose dominant personality had effectively put him in a leadership role, made a trip southeast along the shore, taking a dog with him. He wanted to live off the land and travel as far as he could. He reached the Skeleton River which was easily negotiated since the shoreline was clogged with ice. For some reason he did not take a tent. He saw artifacts from the *Karluk* expedition (but no tent), and when it rained, he and his companion had no choice but to huddle together. He encountered little game and was forced to start back towards the camp when the rain subsided. Exhausted, Knight wandered off course, and upon reaching the Skeleton River again, discovered that it was running higher than a few days before. Forced to enter the icy waters, Knight and the dog crossed, collapsing in exhaustion on the other side. Struggling to reach the main camp, Knight professed to be feeling fine (although the dog was lame, and the soles of Knight's boots were paper-thin). But he wasn't fine at all; the trip had robbed him of much strength and may have contributed to the illness that was to follow.

Knight had suffered from scurvy on Stefansson's Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913-1918. For more than a month he had eaten no fresh meat. He suffered hip pains then (as he was now) and gum swelling that loosened his teeth, diagnostic signs of the disease. Effectively incapacitated, Knight and a fellow sufferer, Harold Noice (who would come to play an important role in Ada's life) had been sledded across the ice to a location where Stefansson successfully hunted caribou. Feasting on undercooked caribou tongue, within a month Knight was fully recovered. Now, on his second journey north, he began to show the early symptoms of exhaustion and persistent aches and soreness, pains he tried to attribute to rheumatism. After his excursion along the coast, Knight spent days in bed, or worked little, and was often irritable. Yet at the same time he made plans for crossing the ice in the Spring.

Autumn was difficult for all five, and Ada's work, although pursued diligently enough, was performed with little enthusiasm. About the time the sun sank below the horizon in November, they moved to a winter camp, lugging the sled over rough terrain capped with thin ice. The temperature was below zero, the bears absent, and the seals still too far off to be hunted. Reduced to eating walrus skin and bread, it is probably not surprising that the plans for a journey across the ice were begun in earnest. The supplies they had brought were clearly insufficient for another year. The game was inconsistent, and the early winter was proving to be especially brutal. It was about this time that Knight revealed to the expedition leader, Allan Crawford, that he was possibly suffering from scurvy. Ada apparently overheard this comment. Nevertheless, Knight planned a trip for himself and Crawford. Although as a Canadian, and thus the person who could lay a claim on the island for the British Empire, Crawford had been designated the leader of the expedition, it was Knight who was consulted for all decisions. Thus, even if Crawford knew of Knight's increasing weakness, he was not in a position to debate. By the time they celebrated their second Christmas (the meal notably lacking in fresh meat) in a new snow house, Knight apparently had determined to try for Nome. He began preparations for in earnest.

Certainly, the concern over sufficient food supplies was upmost in everyone's mind, but this was not the only reason that Knight decided to leave the island. He wanted to communicate with the outside world, to contact Stefansson and report their status. They believed that

Stefansson would be in Alaska. Knight estimated it would take 60 or 70 days to reach Nome. What made him think he could undertake such a journey in his weakened state is a mystery. Or perhaps he did not think much at all. He, as with the others, was becoming desperate.

The temperature remained below zero, but the status of the icepack was unknown. It could not be assumed that it was solid, as leads often opened, or the pack would shift unexpectedly, sometimes beneath a traveler's feet. Knight had experienced firsthand the difficulties of ice travel on his first Arctic trip. Familiar with navigating the ice, he would have also known how difficult that endeavor could be.

Leaving final letters behind for Stefansson and their families, with five dogs weakened by a deficient diet, and a sled loaded with 700 pounds of supplies, Knight and Crawford left the camp on January 7, 1923, heading south. Ada, Galle, and Maurer watched them go and then resumed their regular duties. Ada and Galle had become closer over the past few months, and so she probably did not mind too much the quietness with Knight gone. Galle was good to her, enjoyed her stories, and had learned some of her native language.

Thirteen days later Knight and Crawford returned to camp, defeated by weather, ice, and their waning physical strength. Often stopped for entire days, they had been forced at times to pull the sled themselves, and had never left the island. The rough, ridged ice seemed malignant, as if determined to keep them there. Offshore appeared no better, and they were constantly cold, with frozen faces, fingers, and toes. Not surprisingly, Knight worsened, and now convinced that he was suffering from scurvy, he and Crawford stumbled back to the winter camp.

Yet, it would seem that once considered, the idea of a journey to the mainland could not be abandoned. In the 13 days they had been gone, it had become clear that Knight was not well enough, but he now decided the other three men would go, taking the dogs and sled, leaving him with Ada. This must have been the worst possible plan for her, as she had never established a comfortable relationship with Knight. Yet she would play no part in the decision; it was Knight's alone. He convinced the others that he could manage the illness, thus leading them to believe that tending camp and hunting were possible for him. It would not have occurred to them that those responsibilities might devolve to Ada. Given the inclinations of the times, if they had known the seriousness of Knight's illness, they probably would not have left the two.

Assuring Ada he would come back for her, on January 29 Galle departed the camp with Maurer and Crawford. Their plans were to travel to Siberia and then to Nome. The temperature, which had hovered at 50 below zero as they prepared, rose, and the weather was good as the men and dogs moved off. They took their diaries with them, with promises that they would assuredly come back on a relief ship the following summer.

After the three left, Knight was for a time able to work. Concerned about being left with Ada, he seemed to believe she wanted a white man for a husband. His diary refers to her as "the woman", and he certainly believed it was his responsibility to hunt for the two of them. He regarded her as incompetent, temperamental, and for obvious reasons to him — her sex and her race — inferior. He knew that he needed fresh meat. For her part, Ada began to mark off the days since the other three men had left.

Knight believed he could keep up his duties and hold on for a couple of months until more game became available. But within a week he collapsed outside the hut, and, forced to rely on Ada to bring him in, he told her about the possibility that he had scurvy. He didn't seem to want to accept this, but regardless of his feelings (and hers), his fainting and subsequent bed rest changed the status of their relationship in a way he would never have wished upon either of them. Weakness forced him to accept his reliance on her. He was frightened, and so was Ada. She would have preferred to remain dependent on him. While Knight looked to his symptoms

for a final confirmation of the disease, the struggle for their survival forced her emotional acceptance of the situation. Ada began to perform the chores normally consigned to the men.

Their supplies did not include some of the best known anti-scorbutic foods, such as citrus juice or vegetables. Knight knew that fresh meat was necessary, yet he also seemed to believe that seal blubber would be sufficient. The other reality, perhaps hardest of all, was that if he could not get strong enough to hunt, there was no chance of acquiring game. Even the fox traps were too difficult for him to check, and Ada had never hunted for the group, although she had tried to fish.

Ada did not know how to use a rifle, so when she left the camp she carried a hunting knife, a weapon that provided little emotional comfort against the terror of meeting a bear. But she began to search for food, traveling miles each day to the fox traps. Eventually she succeeded in trapping a fox. This would be the last fresh meat for some time, and it was cooked thoroughly, rather than left half-raw. It was as if neither she nor Knight knew exactly what to do, or perhaps they did not want to believe how ill he was, and in spite of his craving for fresh meat, Knight apparently did not give any instructions in regard to the cooking.

Knight dutifully noted his symptoms in his diary, still maintaining some sense of humor. He was bedridden now, his softened gums revealing the sure signs of scurvy. His body ached, and he suffered from a constant headache. Purple spots seemed to come and go on his legs, and he was as much annoyed with Ada as dependent on her. There had not been any fresh meat since Ada's single fox catch, and both she and Knight acknowledged that her abilities would always be limited. Yet he seemed to revive when she brought in another fox, and they ate it half-cooked. It had been a month since their three companions had left.

Although Ada began to have more success in the trapping, Knight failed to improve. The spotting and lines on his body increased, and he had difficulty swallowing. He was thin, in pain when he breathed, and barely able to eat at all. Forcing himself, however, and with Ada consistently trapping foxes, by March they wistfully believed that he was better and that as soon as the ice pack thinned, they would be rescued. But the hope was short-lived, and salvation in the form of a ship seemed denied to the two isolated souls. It was at this time that Ada began to write her own journal.

She, too, suffered from weakness, including an eye that became infected. In late winter, even the fox traps were empty, but she seemed to recover from the infection and weakness, while Knight continued to deteriorate, his body wasting away. Once he had been large, robust, stronger than his friends; now he could barely move. Ada took care of all his needs now, cleaning his bedding, and trying to make him comfortable. He seemed to vacillate between anger at her and submission. Truly frightened, and undoubtedly provoked at his ingratitude, she seemed resigned to death, and wrote a "will", designating what she wanted to be done with her goods, and where she wanted her son to go.

Dispirited and ill, she spoke little with Knight, but rather developed the habit of reading the Bible that had belonged to Knight's grandfather. Her only other companion was the cat, Vic. Knight remained bedridden, hostile to her, and terribly ill. Then, as the temperature rose in May and the birds began to return, Ada decided to learn to use the rifle. It was almost too heavy for her, and she devised a prop for her shoulder as a partial shield against its power. Reduced to a bread diet at this point, it was paramount that she learn to hunt. Her first kill was a gull which she made into a soup for Knight. But although she built a platform from which to watch for polar bears, Ada never succeeded in gathering sufficient courage to shoot one. Eluding her, too, were the walrus that returned in May. She built a small skin boat in the hopes of hunting the seals that could be heard offshore as the ice broke and melted.

But it was too late for Ada's newly acquired skill at hunting to save Knight. Eating had been difficult for him all winter, and now he could hardly eat at all. Ada's hunting was inconsistent, and thus meat was never in constant supply. They needed each other, reluctant as both seemed to admit. Yet Ada must have known that she would not have him as a companion, however ill and silent, much longer. He could not eat uncooked meat, even when it was available, and so any hope of curing the disease was quickly disappearing. The weather raged through May, and remained cold. Knight shivered, and she helped him by warming bags filled with sand, and to ease the aches in his fragile body, made cotton pillows beneath him. His veins weakened by the disease, he bled easily. The meat that they could not obtain with any consistency might have saved him, but without it, his chances dimmed with each passing day.

The end for him came quietly, during the night of June 22nd, 1923. Ada wrote a note to record the death. Then, Knight's body still resting on the bed where he died, she left the winter home they had shared since January and moved into the storage tent. Speaking kindly to her at the end, Knight had left her. She fixed up her new residence as best she could, and alone, she could only hope for a relief ship to come that summer.

A week later, the polar bears were back.

In retrospect, Knight's death at the age of thirty remains a tragedy, as all such deaths that might have been prevented relatively easy, with questions. What if Ada had learned to hunt in her native village? What if Crawford, Maurer, and Galle had not left them – had realized that Knight could not fend for himself? What if Knight had been able to hunt just a few more weeks – had shot a polar bear? Although he preferred meat well cooked (and perhaps this is the reason he was afflicted with the disease early on) he also knew the importance of raw meat to scurvy victims.

Finally, what if Stefansson had planned for the eventuality — the reality — of their inexperience in hunting?

Within days after Knight died, Ada met with some success in hunting ducks. She also killed her first seal, but she remained unwilling to hunt a bear. While in her tent she sewed and processed the seal skins. She had taken the precaution, too, of drying and storing meat. She read her Bible daily, the one that Knight had given to her as he lay ill. Always hopeful, she sewed for Bennett and for herself. And as the ice melted away from the shore, she ate the last of the stored biscuits, and watched for a ship. It was the third week of August. Knight had been dead for nearly two months.

The ship came first to Rodger's Harbor, where the survivors of the *Karluk* sinking had camped nine years before. But there were no signs of recent occupation, and so the commander of the *Donaldson* moved the ship south, watching the beach for signs of life. On board the ship were thirteen new colonists, replacements for the four men that Noice felt certain he would find. He and a few crew members went ashore near the original landing site and found the bottle with the names of the four men, and the document claiming the island for Britain. Moving on through foggy conditions towards a place named Doubtful Harbor, on the morning of August 20th, a crew member spotted a figure on the beach.

In her shelter, Ada thought the rumbling sound was the groans of walrus. But the sound was constant and seemed to come closer. She roused herself from the warmth of the tent and went outside. She peered through the fog and there, close to shore, was the mast of a ship. Within minutes a skin boat with a white man and some Inuit landed, and as the figures disembarked and moved towards her, Ada realized that she did not know them. She had expected that when rescue came, her three companions would return for her.

Noice did not know that Galle, Crawford, and Maurer had left the island. They had never been seen on the mainland. As the crew greeted her, Ada could not seem to grasp that the three were gone; she had assumed all along that they were safe. She began to sob.

Carrying her to the skin boat, Noice transported Ada to the ship. There he gave her coffee and asked for the story of what had happened. Still failing to grasp that Crawford, Galle, and Maurer were never found, Ada found a sympathetic voice in Noice, a man whose Arctic experience could easily conceive of how difficult such a journey would have been.

At the camp, the tent that had been home to Ada appeared as tattered and decrepit to the crew of the *Donaldson*. The canvas was shredded, the stove was crude, and the food supplies nearly gone. Yet Ada had lived there, taking comfort in the company of a cat, her hopes resting on the sea.

On August 21st Lorne Knight was buried on Wrangel Island, and there he would always remain. Ada gave his diary to Noice. This man also bought Ada's firs at a low price and confiscated artifacts collected by the expedition, including mammoth ivory. Ada kept the Bible.

Now Ada thought only of going home and waited impatiently while the new colonists unloaded their supplies. The *Donaldson* finally departed, and as they steamed east Noice began to read Knight's and Ada's diaries. What he read would set in motion a controversy that would affect Ada profoundly. But safe on the ship she did not know that sensationalist reporting might hurt her in the future. Still not fully understanding why her companions were not alive, and receiving little mail, she only could look forward to seeing Bennett, the son she had left two years before.

By August 31 Ada was back home in Nome. Here Noice sent a telegram to Stefansson in which he disclosed the sad outcome of his rescue operation. Although first expressing shock, Stefansson's immediate reaction was a list of "shoulds." There "should" have been enough game to hunt, and certainly the explorers "should" have been experienced enough to ensure their own survival. Stefansson continued to downplay and profess sadness over the loss of the four, but at the same time did not hesitate to seek out money-making opportunities. So while Stefansson pontificated with the goal of further promoting his plans, the four families of the young men were left to grieve. When she reached home, in her anxiousness to see her son, Ada could not have conceived of the trials that she would have to contend with. While she looked forward to a reunion, the plans of Captain Noice were already taking form.

First heralded as a heroine, Ada was newsworthy beyond the boundaries of Nome, and requests for interviews soon besieged the quiet woman. She had no interest in relating the painful memories, and, hoping to receive better treatment for Bennett away from Nome, that autumn Ada and her son left for Seattle. There she would continue to be hounded by reporters, who had managed to find out her destination. Ada, who had been advised to not sign any contracts when she joined the expedition, now decided that commitment two years before prohibited signing anything, even something as seemingly innocent as a simple autograph.

While Ada's primary mission in Seattle was to secure hospital care for her tuberculin son, Stefansson and Noice set in motion their own plans for this sole survivor. Stefansson wrote to the U.S. Bureau of Education, the agency responsible for all Inuit peoples in America, and learned that Ada was in Seattle. He advised the Bureau against possible exploitation of Ada, assuring them that her story was worth a considerable sum. Meanwhile, Ada had apparently fallen under the influence of a rather dubious character, a man named Harvey whom she had met on the ship that brought her and Bennett to Seattle.

Temporary relief for the lonely woman came from the parents of the man she had attempted to save. In Seattle, Ada had gone into near seclusion in a seedy rooming house, where she waited for improvement in Bennett's health. He was in the hospital, and, mistrusting

nearly everyone at this point (except for, perhaps, the elusive Harvey), Ada was worn out. When John Knight knocked repeatedly at her door, she finally greeted him, but talked only a short time. In the brief conversation, she told Knight that Noice had taken her diary and never paid her for its use. It was clear that she could make the effort to speak with Knight only because he was Lorne's father.

When he returned to his home in McMinnville, Oregon, Knight invited Ada to visit. She decided to accept and in December traveled south by train. It was the first time in her life that Ada had been a guest in a white man's home. To her, the Knight's house was palatial. Ada returned the few items in her possession that had belonged to Lorne, but the kindly parents told her to keep the Bible. Relaxing in the warmth of their friendship, she became more talkative, and cried often when speaking of the four men. For the Knights, having Ada there provided a means of learning about their son in his last days. They were impressed with her demeanor and invited her to stay. Friends and strangers visited her, some just curious, but most genuinely concerned. The Knights gave her an engraved wristwatch, and seemed to feel better with Ada in their home. But as much as the visit might have provided some sense of closure, Ada needed to return to Seattle, where Bennett was still hospitalized.

It is hardly surprising that Ada, a shy, retiring person, would become more withdrawn. Nor was it unexpected that both Stefansson and Noice would seek to capitalize on the Wrangel expedition, a story made more newsworthy by its outcome. Notwithstanding his controversial role (and it had not escaped notice of many critics) in the disaster, Stefansson was certainly eager to obtain information from Ada. He was concerned about the status of the diaries, which were still in Noice's possession.

By the time Ada made the trip to McMinnville, Noice had already published the first of his sensational takes on the tragedy. In possession of Lorne Knight's diary, he had edited the document by crossing out sections, and perhaps (although denied by Noice) tearing out pages. He published a newspaper article in which he used the diary to support the contention that the expedition was ill-equipped and composed of people too inexperienced for the venture. As upsetting as such publications were to Knight's parents, they apparently were won over by Stefansson, in spite of the ongoing criticism of this charismatic organizer. Criticism was particularly sharp in Canada, Stefansson's home country.

If Ada responded to Noice's first publications with withdrawal from public contact, and especially reporters, whom she sought to avoid at all costs, the worst was yet to come. Noice accused Ada of being a prostitute, of going to the island for sexual services, and not as a cook or seamstress. This, he said, was the reason behind her refusal to work. The men, themselves, were supposedly not interested in her for sex, but rather wanted to her only as a seamstress. Inconsistent throughout, Noice related a more accurate account to some associates, but the sensationalist spin would sell more.

Ada may have had a questionable reputation when she lived in Nome, but there is no evidence of prostitution. Likewise, it was not unusual for explorers to capitalize on their adventures by publishing them; a good income was a real possibility. Stefansson threatened Noice with a lawsuit if he did not turn over the diaries and other papers, and, in the end, he received the altered documents. Pages were missing, and there was the matter of crossed-out entries.

All of these machinations must have been completely foreign to Ada's experience. Undoubtedly she wanted to be paid for the rights to her diary, but she could not understand the distortion of what she knew had happened.

In 1924 Ada met Stefansson in Seattle. She told him that she had not torn any pages from Knight's diary, and certainly there were not any deleted sections.

Rather than satisfied with Ada's accurate portrayal of the diaries, Stefansson was most certainly not finished with her. Through a friend, the chief of police from Nome, she was persuaded to sell her rights to her diary. Meanwhile, another friend of his who lived in Seattle — Inglis Fletcher — invited Ada and Bennett on a trip to Los Angeles. Bennett had been released from the hospital, still not completely cured, and Ada was told the warmth of California would be good for him. Vacillating, she finally agreed to go. Although Fletcher apparently became fond of Ada, she went with the understanding that more interviews were very important for Stefansson's purposes. On the trip, Ada opened up with Peggy Fletcher in a way that she had not done before. She avoided other people, as always, particularly the reporters. For most of the trip to California, Ada stayed in her cabin. She arrived in San Francisco coincidental with the publication of another of Noice's articles. In it, he directly attacked Ada, claiming that earlier stories of her as a heroine had been in error. Knight had starved while Ada stayed fat, Noice claimed; she had mistreated the dying man.

It was Noice's slandering that reversed Ada's decision to never permit interviews. By the time she arrived in Los Angeles, Noice's article was being discussed everywhere. Badgered and hurt, and lacking understanding of why anyone would say such things, Ada walked into the Los Angeles Times office and talked at length with a reporter. It was the first time she had given such an extensive accounting of her time on Wrangel. The publishing of her story brought sympathy and support. A week later, Ada packed up hers and Bennett's belongings and left by train, her stated intention to go back to Nome. She asked Inglis Fletcher to inquire again about her diary. Ada wanted it back. Meanwhile, apparently satisfying a jealous wife with his accusatory articles, Noice left with his partner for a honeymoon in the Arctic. Unfortunately, Ada did not get north of Seattle.

Destitute and alone, Ada and Bennett ended up in a Seattle hospital. Stefansson had lost interest in her by this time but busied himself with lecture tours and his writing. He also sold the "title" to Wrangel Island to two Americans, Carl and Ralph Lomen. This removed responsibility for the colonists that were left on the island. The Lomen's outfitted a relief ship that failed to reach Wrangel; it was the Russians who in 1924 would effectively imprison the colonists and lay a permanent claim in the process. Wrangel Island became a Russian possession, Stefansson's and the Lomen's protestations notwithstanding. The western world moved on to other news. For the most part, the story of Wrangel seemed closed.

Stefansson's spin continued to expand, however. He pressured Noice to submit a retraction of his efforts to slander the expedition members. Noice complied, an action that resulted in the ending of his marriage once again (the couple was in Brazil now) and wrote a woeful account of the reasons for his exaggerations. This new story was printed in Stefansson's subsequent book about the tragic Wrangel expedition, *The Adventure of Wrangel Island*. The hapless Noice had played into Stefansson's hands. With the publication of the book, Stefansson was a hero once again, much to the dismay of some of the bereaved family members.

While Wrangel fell into Russian hands, and Stefansson and Noice settled their differences, Ada's life in Seattle continued to hold little chance for happiness. When Peggy Fletcher visited in December of 1924, there was a new baby present. Apparently the absent Harvey was the father, but he was of little help to Ada. The room where she lived was as dismal as could be imagined. Peggy was kind, but still clearly under instructions from Stefansson. He wanted a retraction from Ada concerning the missing pages from Knight's diary. Ada wrote this, but Peggy came back again, wanting more information about the activities on the island. By January 1925 Ada was once more destitute.

Weary and wanting to return to Nome, but feeling that she would be hounded there, and needing to get away from the abusive Harvey, Ada fled to Spokane, telling no one of her

destination. She effectively disappeared from sight at this time, but two years later she was on Kodiak Island in Alaska, apparently seriously ill with tuberculosis. She had placed her two sons in a mission school near Seward. This institution, the Jesse Lee Home, enjoyed a good reputation. Although still ill from tuberculosis, Ada could visit her sons at the Home. But with her youngest son barely knowing his mother, it seemed like Ada's life was one of continual sadness. Her reputation as a heroine had been restored by Stefansson's book, but that provided little comfort. Stefansson himself had decided that he wanted nothing to do with Ada.

Ada's life continued to be a haunting and sad one. Never able to let go of the memories of her experiences on Wrangel, wedding twice again only to have the marriages end within months, she returned to Seattle for a short stay. By the time her second son, Billy, was nine, she was able to bring the children to Nome with her. There for a time she made a living by hunting and trapping. She moved to Anchorage and engaged in numerous employment opportunities. Ada never received any income from Stefansson's book. As the Depression years engulfed the world, Ada Blackjack seemed to disappear from it.

In 1950, she made one final request to Stefansson for money. Years later she granted an interview, apparently in response to pressure from her surviving son, Billy (Bennett had died in 1972). The memories of Wrangel still seemed fresh to Ada at times, and invaded her dreams as well as her consciousness. This was to be her last interview.

Ada died on May 29, 1983, at the age of 84. She was living in a nursing home at the time.

With her death, Ada's life was bestowed with a certain justice. It was her son, Billy, who would ensure his mother's legacy as a brave and heroic woman. Billy had sought for several years the honor he felt his mother deserved, but it was not until she died that his quest was fulfilled. A month later, Billy's beloved mother was honored with a citation by the Alaska Legislature. The sad story of Ada Blackjack had achieved a quiet grace.